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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the crisis in preservation of North American Indian languages looks at a variety of general and specific issues. First, it examines briefly current efforts by international organizations for maintenance of endangered languages worldwide. The discussion then turns to North American Indian languages, and particularly to three issues: (1) how to set priorities about which languages and varieties of languages to document, and the relationship between linguists and the community in this effort; (2) the kinds of cooperative projects that have been successful to date; and (3) the social and professional responsibility of the linguist, as a scientist and as a teacher of future researchers. The urgency of the problem is emphasized. (MSE)

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SYMPOSIUM: PRESERVATION OF NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN LANGUAGES
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The crisis currently facing us as linguists is at last becoming generally recognized: linguistic diversity is vanishing from our world at an alarming rate. Michael Krauss estimates that the coming century will see the death or doom of 90% of the languages in our world.

The seriousness of the situation was eloquently portrayed by participants in the 1991 LSA Symposium on Endangered Languages and their Preservation organized by Ken Hale, the proceedings of which appear in the March 1992 issue of *Language*. Papers by Hale, Krauss, Lucille Watahomigie and Akira Yamamoto, Colette Craig, Laverne Masayesva Jeanne, and Nora England highlight the shocking extent of the loss and explore some of the social and political factors involved in preservation.

There has been a tremendous response to this crisis in recent months. The LSA has now established a committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation, chaired by Michael Krauss. The German Society for Linguistics (DGfS) has constituted a Committee on Endangered Languages to coordinate efforts in Europe. The Society for the Study of Indigenous Languages of the Americas (SSILA) has designated a representive, Akira Yamamoto, to coordinate preservation efforts with Native American organizations. The Native American Language Issues Institute (NALI), a Native American organization specifically concerned with the preservation of the cultures and languages of North America, has established a committee for Professional Cooperation and Collaboration. The Comité International Permanent des Linguistes (CIPL) designated the theme of the 1992 International Congress of Linguists 'Endangered Languages'. A volume supported by UNESCO has recently appeared, *Endangered Languages*, edited by Robins and Uhlenbeck. The theme of the 48th International Congress of Americanists, to be held in Sweden in 1994, will be 'Threatened peoples and environments of the Americas'.

Our next step is to explore further just what linguists can and should be doing. The purpose of this panel is to initiate discussion of our roles as individual working linguists and as members of the discipline, with a focus on the situation in our own backyard: North America. The discussion will center around several points.

1. Whose language?

It is important to recogni[illegible] at the outset that these languages belong first to their speakers and the descendants of those speakers. It is their goals that must take priority at a time when human resources are increasingly scarce.

Just as there is tremendously rich linguistic and cultural diversity in North America, there is also diversity in linguistic, social, cultural, and political situations. The goals of

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preservation efforts can vary considerably from one community to the next. In those where the traditional language is still in daily use among a substantial proportion of community members, success might involve both the documentation of language use in a variety of situations and continuing bilingual virtuosity among as many people as possible. Alternatively, in communities where the language is remembered by only a few elders and seldom if ever used, success might involve the documentation of as much language use as possible and instilling an appreciation of the special character and structure of the language, perhaps a knowledge of key cultural vocabulary and an understanding of the special kinds of grammatical distinctions that have evolved over centuries of use. Some very successful language programs in North America have not produced fluent speakers of the traditional languages, but they have resulted in an important sense of pride in heritage.

Most communities are characterized by internal diversity as well. Even in small Native communities, there are usually differences in the language of different generations, sexes, neighboorhoods, and even families. Sometimes these differences go largely unnoticed until efforts at documentation or teaching are undertaken. In many cases, such work has been perceived as the prescription of norms. Special sensitivity to the complex social dimensions of preservation projects is essential to successful programs.

The past several decades have shown clearly that the most successful preservation projects have been truly joint efforts between local communities and linguists. Programs that are fueled by the vision, expertise, and energy of community members obviously have a better chance of success than those imposed from the outside. At the same time, it has become apparent that technical linguistic skills play a key role. Time after time communities have tried valiently to mount revitalization projects without success, only because basic techniques of orthography construction, grammatical description, curriculum development, and language teaching were unavailable. Once technical assistance has become accessible, they have been able to direct their talents to highly successful programs. Several kinds of projects, joining the special skills and goals of individual communities with linguistic techniques, have been proving successful.

2. Kinds of cooperative projects

The passage of the Native American Languages Act (PL 101-477) on October 30, 1990, made it an official policy for the first time in the history of the United States to 'preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedom of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American languages'. A proposal is currently before Congress to make available funding for the support and encouragement of Native American language survival.

One kind of cooperative work can be seen at the University of Oklahoma, where native speaker-linguist teams teach courses in North American languages. During the 1991-92 academic year, Creek, Choctaw, Dakota, and Cherokee were offered for university credit. The program has been received with enthusiasm by both students at the University of Oklahoma and, even more importantly, by the Native communities. The program provides an excellent model of the institutionalization of maintenance efforts.

A second kind of cooperative work can be seen in the Native American Languages Development Institute. Many local governments currently require a bilingual education endorsement for Native American teachers and paraprofessionals engaged in bilingual/bicultural education programs. There is thus a tremendous need for training in linguistics, particularly in such areas as fieldwork techniques, skills in analyzing collected data, compiling and publishing the results of such analysis, principles of first and second language acquisition, and in curriculum development. The Native American Language Development Institute is currently working to meet that need.

3. Our roles as linguists and as members of the discipline

The best response to the current crisis is not necessarily the immediate departure of every professional linguist for the field. As languages become endangered, linguistic communities become increasingly fragile. There is little time, but also little room for mistakes. The fragility brings certain responsibilities. First, the values and goals of speakers and their communities must be carefully considered and respected. Skilled speakers are a finite, shrinking resource, whose time and patience is precious. If their first linguistic work is of little interest to them, further documentation of their languages, for any purpose, may never again be possible. Second, with such limited resources, it is critical that we bring the highest level of technical skill possible to the field. Competence in transcription and phonological and grammatical analysis must be finely tuned. The fieldworker cannot afford to be narrow: sensitivity to the interaction of all parts of linguistic structure is essential. Finally, it is our responsibility to bring as much background knowledge as possible about the language and its cultural context to our work.

The current crisis calls for a reevaluation of our priorities. Now, more than ever, languages must be documented respectfully, in their own terms. It is important to record not only what speakers hypothesize could be said, but what is in fact said, in its linguistic and cultural context. The enduring value of the full grammars, dictionaries, and text collections produced by linguists such as Boas and Sapir is becoming ever more evident. These materials have become invaluable resources in many of the communities in which they were originally prepared, as young people research their own linguistic and cultural heritage. Insightful grammars can provide a basis for language curricula that present the language according to its own genius, rather than the ill-fitting models of European languages taught in local school. Good dictionaries are being consulted ever more frequently as reminders of culturally important terminology familiar to fewer and fewer speakers. Records of legends, historical narratives, children's stories, descriptions of special skills, and ceremonial oratory are ever more appreciated for the insight they provide into traditional ways of viewing the world. We now have an important technological advantage over earlier pioneering scholars with the availability of good recording equipment. We can now document the language with good speakers much more faithfully and with far less intrusion. We can finally record conversation, the most fundamental genre of language use in any community, and with it a central aspect of any culture: traditional styles of interaction.

The same kind of full documentation is proving increasingly important for us as

linguists. When we lose a language, we lose more than a particular selection of consonants, although that certainly happens, or a particular set of word orders. We lose alternative ways of conceptualizing the world and human experience that have evolved over millenia. Probably some of us are more intrigued by the similarities we find among languages, while others of us glory in the astonishing extent of the differences, but ultimately most of us are concerned with understanding the interplay of the two. The less diversity we are aware of, the shallower our notions of the universal cognitive principles underlying human language. If we record only answers to our own questions, we cannot hope to learn much more than what we suspected in the first place.

A striking aspect of many of the languages that are currently endangered is their polysynthesis, their rich morphological complexity. The morphological categories they have grammaticized are not arbitrary. They have evolved through use; they constitute a record of the distinctions speakers have made the most frequently over the course of their development. A recognition of the fundamental roles of grammaticization and lexicalization processes in the use and evolution of languages are only slowly finding a place in current linguistic theory. The polysynthetic languages we are losing so rapidly could tell us much about these processes, but only if recorded as they are used. The respectful documentation of these languages in their own terms will ultimately provide the most enduring resource for linguists as well as for local communities. It will provide a record of what we do not yet know enough to ask.

Whether or not we choose, as individual linguists, to work directly with speakers, we can accomplish a great deal as members of the discipline. As members of linguistics departments, we can put a high value on equipping students with the skills of recording, analysis, and sensitive collaboration with speakers. We can insure that our departments contain faculty members capable of giving such training, provide opportunities for students to acquire it, and officially recognize its value. Insightful grammatical description is a tremendous intellectual achievement, requiring both competence on all levels of linguistic structure, from phonetics through phonology, morphology, syntax, and discourse, and solid background knowledge of theoretical issues. Responsible documentation will be of lasting importance to linguists and local communities alike. If the value of this work is not overtly recognized, students and faculty alike will not feel they can afford to invest their time and energy in it. We will lose the very foundation of our discipline before we have had the chance to even realize what has been lost.

Now is the time to reevaluate our priorities as a discipline, lest, as Michael Krauss has warned, 'linguistics go down in history as the only science that presided obliviously over the disappearance of 90% of the very field to which it is dedicated'.